

HISTORY

OF THE

GREAT IRON CHAIN,

LAI D ACROSS THE HUDSON RIVER
AT WEST POINT IN 1778, BY ORDER OF
...GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON....



On exhibition at the Military War Museum, 579 Broadway, New York,
FRANCIS BANNERMAN.



DESK WEIGHT MADE FROM THE CHAIN.

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BOX 51

HISTORY

OF THE IRON CHAIN LAID ACROSS THE HUDSON RIVER AT WEST POINT.

DURING the war of the Revolution the British made constant efforts to gain control of the Hudson River, and thus open a water-way between Canada and their forces in New York, by means of the Hudson, Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence.

So far, every effort made by them had failed—Burgoyne's magnificent army had met with two defeats; its foragers cut off at Bennington, and its veterans annihilated at Saratoga.

In 1780 there opened before Sir Henry Clinton a fairer prospect of success than ever before—not by meeting the Americans on the battle-field, but by the treason of one of their trusted officers, Benedict Arnold. The man who had fought so gallantly at Saratoga now condescended, through wounded vanity and revenge, to betray his country. He sought from Washington the post of Commander at West Point, pleading his inability, on account of wounds, for active service—but, in reality, that he might give Sir Henry Clinton, the Commander in New York, an opportunity to effect the plan so ardently desired by the British.

Arnold had been Court-martialled for various derelictions of duty, and had received a sentence, that of reprimand from the Commander-in-Chief. This had been given in as mild terms as possible, for Washington had always favored Arnold, and commended his military genius. From this moment Arnold was a traitor, and opened correspondence, by secret means, with the enemy in New York. How nearly successful was this treason all readers of history know; but what means of defense our forces at West Point possessed, and how the river was guarded, may not be so clear in the minds of all; so, with your permission, we will relate a bit of history.

West Point was already a depot for military stores, powder and ammunition, and there were forts on either side which guarded the river.

In the beginning of the war General Washington had foreseen that other defenses were necessary, and ordered the forging of chains, which, placed under the waters, should effectually bar the passage of the enemy's fleet. As early as 1776 an immense chain, which had been used to obstruct the river Sorel, was brought from Lake Champlain, but was not of sufficient length to cross the Hudson; so, from iron ore found at Livingston Manor, another chain was forged at Poughkeepsie. This chain, completed in the same year, and stretched between Fort Montgomery and Anthony's Nose, was unfortunate from the first. A week after it was laid down its links parted, and, though rescued and strengthened, it was de-

stroyed by the British when, in 1777, they gained control of the river above the Highlands. General Washington never relinquished the plan of thus obstructing the Hudson, and determined to look for more suitable points where chains might be placed. West Point, where the course of the river abruptly changed, and where the speed of vessels was lessened by heavy tides, was, in General Washington's opinion, the most favorable spot for the purpose. The river here was 300 feet narrower than at Fort Montgomery, where the first obstruction had been placed.

After consultation with officers and engineers of the army and the government of New York, West Point was strongly fortified, and it was decided that a chain should be made of sufficient length to stretch from this point to Constitution Island. Bids were offered for the manufacture of the chain, and that of the Sterling Iron Works was accepted. This decision was made known to Peter Townsend, one of the proprietors of the Sterling Iron Works, by Timothy Pickering, who reached his house late on a Saturday night, March, 1778. It was snowing hard, but the times admitted of no delay, and amid the darkness of the night the party set out for the furnaces. At daylight on Sunday morning the forges were in operation, and in six weeks the work was done.

Peter Townsend was a Quaker, so could not bear arms; but, being a true patriot, was glad to avail himself of this peaceful way of assisting the cause of liberty.

We scarcely realize what labor the forging of this chain involved. There was no machinery and no skilled labor at hand. Welsh miners were brought from Pennsylvania to do the work; and Connecticut men, with their ox-teams, carried the links over the rough and unbroken mountain roads, cut through the forest to New Windsor, the nearest point on the river. Here, under the superintendence of an engineer, they were fastened together and fixed on floats, and by this means were sent down the river to West Point.

We may have some idea of the immense undertaking when we consider that each link weighed 300 pounds, was more than two feet long, and $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches square. Each 100 feet was secured by a swivel, and there was a clevis to every 1,000 feet. The whole weighed 165 tons. With it were delivered 12 tons of anchors, which were used to keep it firm when moored. In addition to these anchors the chain, which, we must remember, was stretched from West Point to Constitution Island, was buoyed up by large logs 16 feet in length—a little pointed at the end to better resist the tide.

This chain was never broken through by the British, but it was no fault of the traitor Arnold that it was not, for he removed one of the links, on pretense of making repairs, so that the enemy's fleet might easily sail up the river. Truly, man proposes, but God disposes.

A greater part of the chain now lies at the bottom of the

Hudson. It is said that about 30 tons have been recovered and are in the possession of historical and patriotic societies. At West Point there are at least 13 links with a staple, placed at what is called the "Chain Battery," near the spot where the chain was stretched across the river. Upon it is a plate giving the date and place of manufacture, and in the Library at the Point is a paper written by Peter Townsend with more particulars of the forging.

There is a family tradition that Peter Townsend died before the chain was finished, and that his wife Hannah Townsend, completed the work, thus filling the contract made with the government. Be that as it may, we certainly do know that Hannah Townsend was a woman of great strength of character and ability. Having no brothers, her father gave her the business education usually acquired by the sons—an education very rare for a woman of that time. Thus upon the death of her husband she was not only competent to assume all his business responsibilities, but also to oversee the large number of miners, teamsters and forgers—a lawless set, employed in mining and transporting the ore to the furnaces. Each morning, after putting her own house in running order, she rode from her home in Chester on horseback, following the rugged and lonely bridle-path to the forges. Here she spent the day, superintending the workmen, keeping the books and attending to all matters incident to a large business enterprise.

The Sterling Iron Works, were established by Lord Sterling, a Revolutionary General, in 1751, and for more than a hundred years continued in operation. Not many years have elapsed since the fires in these furnaces were finally extinguished. The iron mountain, with its rich bed of ore, has passed into the possession of others. The old forge is now within the domain of Tuxedo Park, the luxurious and autumnal home of wealthy and fashionable New Yorkers. We doubt if many recall the eventful days when the beautiful mountain scenery witnessed other and more stirring scenes, and in fancy only we seek Hannah Townsend, travelling the lonely path to the forge, or hear the creaking wheels of the ox-cart, as the heavy links of the chain are laboriously transported to the riverside.

In the Artillery Laboratory at West Point is deposited a portion of the famous chain stretched across the river (Hudson) in 1776, to obstruct the passage of the enemy's vessels.

There are 12 links, two clevises or swivels, and a portion of a link. These links are made of iron bars $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches square, are each about two feet in length, and weigh about 140 pounds each.

It was fixed to huge blocks on each shore, under cover of batteries on both sides of the river, the remains of which are still visible.

It was buoyed up by very large logs, about 16 feet long, pointed at both ends. The logs were placed at short distance apart; the chain carried over them, and made fast by staples; and

anchors were dropped at proper distances, and made fast to the logs and chain.

On the 18th of November, 1775, Congress was occupied in providing for the fortification of West Point. Operations commenced on the 29th of August, 1776, and its outworks built.

In January, 1778, a Committee of the New York Legislature recommended that additional works should be erected at West Point, and Kusiosko was appointed to carry out and superintend the same.

In addition to the batteries upon the hilltops the river was obstructed by an enormous chain of iron.

The iron of the chain was wrought from ore of equal parts from the Sterling and Long mines in Orange County, New York.

The chain was made by the firm of Noble and Townsend, consisting of Abel Noble and Peter Townsend, at the Sterling Iron Works, situated about twenty-five miles from West Point.

The Sterling works were established by a "Lord" Sterling in 1851. Sterling was an Englishman who had purchased his patent of nobility, which, however, carried with it no estate in England. Shortly after he arrived in this country he purchased this tract of land, which bears his name. This afterwards became the property of Mr. Abel Noble, of Pennsylvania, who erected larger and more modern works. Mr. Noble had married the niece of Peter Townsend, and they became associated in business under the name of Noble and Townsend.

Mr. Noble, on retiring from business to private life, sold the Sterling tract to Mr. Peter Townsend, and it has remained in the Townsend family until within a few years, belonging now to the Sterling Mountain Railway and Iron Co.

Mr. Noble resided at Sterling until his retirement from business, when he purchased the Bellevale property and resided there till his death.

Mr. Peter Townsend resided at Chester. The house remained without alteration until within about fifteen years. He died there, and is buried in the plot on the place, as is also his wife, who was Hannah Hauxhurst, daughter of William Hauxhurst, an iron merchant in New York.

In a violent snow-storm, late at night, Col. Timothy Peckering and Captain Machin arrived at Mr. Peter Townsend's house in Chester, on a Saturday, when a contract was entered into between Noble and Townsend and Capt. Machin, Deputy-Quartermaster General, for the manufacture of the chain, and its delivery at West Point. The original of the contract is preserved among the "Clinton Papers," in the New York State Library, Albany.

So great was the emergency thought to be that Col. Pickering and Capt. Machin set out late that night, in the snow-storm, for Sterling; and at day-light on Sunday morning the forges were in operation. As fast as the links were made, they were taken to

West Point by the teams of the farmers in the neighborhood; and within a period of six weeks the whole chain was finished. It weighed 180 tons.

When Arnold was arranging his plans for the delivery of West Point to the British the chain became a special object of his attention. A few days before the discovery of his treason he wrote to Andre, informing him that he had weakened the obstruction in the river by ordering a link of the chain to be taken out and carried to a smithy, under the pretense that it needed repairs. He assured him that the link would not be replaced until the forts should be in possession of the British. The chain answered its purpose, and was undoubtedly one of the main obstacles to Sir Henry Clinton's attempt to relieve Burgoyne by an advance up the Hudson River.

COPY OF CONTRACT

FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE IRON CHAIN LAID ACROSS THE HUDSON RIVER AT WEST POINT,

1778.

BY NOBLE, TOWNSEND AND COMPANY, STERLING IRON
WORKS, ORANGE COUNTY, NEW YORK.

This original agreement or contract of Noble, and Townsend, for the construction of the great chain stretched across the Hudson River at West Point on April 30th, 1778, is deposited with the Clinton Papers, in the New York State Library, at Albany, New York.

Article of Agreement between Noble, Townsend & Co., Proprietors of the Sterling Iron Works, in the State of New York, of the one part, and Hugh Hughes, Deputy Quarter Master General to the Army of the United States of the other part;

Witnesseth:—That the said Noble Townsend & Co., jointly and severally, engage to have made and ready to deliver at their works, to the said Hugh Hughes, D. Q. M. G., or to the D. Q. M. G. of the Middle Department for the time being, on or before the first day of April next ensuing the date hereof, or as much sooner as circumstances will admit, an Iron Chain, of the following dimensions and quality that is, in length five hundred yards, each link about two feet long, to be made of the best Sterling Iron, two inches and one quarter square, or as near thereto as possible, with a swivel to every hundred feet, and a clevis to every thousand feet, in the same manner as those of the former chain.

The said Noble, Townsend & Co. also engage to have made, and ready to be delivered, at least twelve tons of anchors of the aforesaid Iron, and of such size as the said Hugh Hughes, or his successors in office, shall direct in writing, as soon as the completion of the chain will admit.

In consideration of which, the said Hugh Hughes, in behalf of the United States, agrees to pay to the said Noble, Townsend & Co., Four hundred and forty pounds for every ton weight of chain and anchors delivered as before mentioned, unless the General Regulations on Trade, Provisions, etc., which are now supposed to be framed by Deputies from the United States, shall be published and take effect before the expiration of four months from the date of this, in which case the price is to be only four hundred pounds per ton, for the said chain and anchors.

The payment, if demanded, to be made in such proportion as the work is ready to be delivered, which shall be determined in ten days after requisition, by a number of competent Judges, not less than three nor more than five, unconcerned with the Proprietors, or the works, and if condemned, to be completed at the expense of said Company, who are also to repair, as aforesaid, all failures of their work, when happening, whether at the works or at the river.

The said Hugh Hughes also engages to procure of the Governor of this state, for the said Noble, Townsend & Co., an exemption for nine months from the date hereof, from military duty, for sixty artificers that are steadily employed at said chain and anchors, till completed.

Agreeable to said exemption, the said Company, complying with the terms thereof: Providing also, that the said Company give the said Hughes, or his successors in office, the Refusal, by letter, of all the Bar Iron, anchors, etc., made at the said works, in the said term of nine months, at the current price, unless what is necessary to exchange for clothing and other articles for the use of the Works.

It is also agreed by the said Parties, that if the teams of the Company haul the said chain or anchors, or any part thereof, to any assigned Post, they shall receive for such services the same pay as shall be given by the United States for the like; the teams of said Company being exempted from impress by any of the Quarter Master General's Deputies, during the space of nine months.

Lastly the said Company engage to use their utmost endeavors to keep seven fires at forging, and ten at welding, if assisted with such hands, as are necessary and can be spared from the Army, in case of their not being able to procure others, the said Company making deductions for their labor.

In witness whereof the Parties have interchangeably subscribed their names this second day of February, One thousand Seven hundred and Seventy-eight, and in the second year of American Independence.

(Signed) PETER TOWNSEND,
In behalf of Noble and Company.

(Signed) HUGH HUGHES,
In behalf of the United States.

In presence of
(Signed) P. TILLINGHAST.

"By direction of General Putnam, Hugh Hughes, Deputy Quarter Master General, visited the Sterling Iron Works of Noble, Townsend & Company, on the 2nd of February, and entered into a contract with the Proprietors to construct a chain."

Ruttember's History Hudson River Obstructions.

SCOTT'S TAVERN, 23d April, 1778.

Sir:—I am jurst Now from Nobels, at Sterling. The Chane is going on fast, But the Anchors (not) owing (They Say) to your not sending the Wate of Them. I hope you will forward your instructions on Receipt of This, as there Cant be anything Don Till you send the Wate of such pertickerler Anchor.

I am in Hast.

WM. HAUXHURST.

To Cp. Machen, Indian Eare.

This chain lay stored at West Point until the Great Sanitary Fair of the Civil War held in New York City, when it was sent to N. Y. to add to the attraction of the fair—with the understanding that it was to be returned to the Government reservation at West Point after the close of the fair. The managers, however, found it to be much cheaper to send it over to the Brooklyn Navy Yard instead of back to West Point. Its great weight and length of 18 links to each shot, weighing 5,600 pounds, made it a very difficult matter to handle, necessitating large windlass trucks with tackle, such as are used in moving heavy machinery.

At the Brooklyn Navy Yard it lay from Civil War days until 1887, when the U. S. Navy Department began to consolidate the different bureaus under one head called The General Storekeepers Department. In order to make this change a Board of Naval Officers was appointed, Commander R. W. Meade being President with authority to visit all Navy Yards to examine all stores and any thing not in use or fit for Naval service was to be condemned and sold at Public Auction. In due time this Board found this old chain and without either knowing the history or having any appreciation for such a valuable relic, ordered it sold at auction, September 4, 1887. W. J. Bannerman & Co. were the buyers—who in turn sold the chain along with a lot of other scrap iron to a forge company for to be worked over into new iron. Shortly after the disposal of the chain Mr. C. F. Gunther of Chicago began to fit up the Libby Prison Museum and was looking around for relics and with the aid of Mr. M. F. Savage, the noted authority on such goods began to trace up the whereabouts of the chain. Their search reached the ears of Mr. John C. Abbey, buyer at Government Auctions, who promptly purchased the chain from the forge company. For about 10 years Mr. Abbey controlled the chain, selling some of the links to collectors. Lately, Francis Bannerman of 579 Broadway, N. Y., purchased the chain

and is now offering it made up into desk weights. A cross section $\frac{1}{4}$ to inches thick planed and polished, surmounted with a small $1\frac{1}{4}$ inch Civil War Canister Shot as handle. The desk weight is stamped, "Section of chain used by General Geo. Washington, West Point, N. Y., 1778."

These handsome souvenirs are sold with this booklet for \$2.75.

Mr. Bannerman has sold 8 links of the chain to Mr. Peter Townsend, one of the descendants, also 2 links to Mr. Davis of Danbury, Conn., and one link to Mr. J. T. Davis of Allegheny, Pa., one of the descendants, who, strange to say, is still in the chain business.

These Desk Weights and links of this chain can be seen at Mr. Bannerman's War Relic Museum 579 Broadway, N. Y. City.

Mr. E. J. Searles of Methuen, Mass., has purchased the balance, some 13 links, which he intends to use to ornament his celebrated Washington Statue at Methuen, Mass.

Ex-Mayor Hewitt became interested, as he is the present owner of the iron mine near the Sterling mines from which the ore came which went into the chain. At Tuxedo is the old forge, then owned by Robert Townsend, great-grand-father of Assistant District Attorney Townsend, where the chain was made. Young Mr. Townsend recently purchased a number of the links.

It appears that the chain was not passed by the enemy, as was the one stretched across Fort Montgomery and Anthony's Nose in 1776. That was swept away twice by the river currents, and a third one was destroyed by the British in 1777, who went then as far up the river as Kingston. The West Point chain was much heavier than the one used at Fort Montgomery.

Lately having had inquiries from Revolutionary War Societies for GAVELS made from real revolutionary war relics we have now in preparation HISTORIC GAVEL. The head or hammer part made from piece of the chain and the handle from the OAK BOWSTEM of the British Powdership "Morning Star" which was blown up in New York harbor during the revolutionary war, the remains of which was found in 1896 when excavating near the Battery. The handle will be about seven inches long, turned and polished. The head about two inches long, $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter hexagonal shaped. The price will be \$25.00, only a few of which can be furnished.

